



## THE DRAGON ROBE AS THE PROFESSIONAL DRESS OF THE QING DYNASTY SCHOLAR-OFFICIAL (THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM COLLECTION)

Helena Heroldová<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** Dragon robes were worn by scholar – officials who were members of bureaucracy of the Qing dynasty in China (1644–1911). The cut and design of the robes were uniform, but the embellishment and motifs including religious symbols were individual and personal. Dragon robes as a garment with high homogeneity and visibility is compared to the “organisational dress” worn by members of contemporary Western organisations. The meaning of both garments is found to be similar, especially as they convey social roles within the organisation and society.

**KEY WORDS:** China – Qing dynasty – dragon robes – anthropology of dress

Dragon robes are common examples of Chinese clothing in many museums with Chinese collections. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dragon robes were given as gifts to notable foreigners by Qing dynasty authorities, while later they were even sold, and many visitors to China brought them back home as souvenirs. After the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911, dragon robes were easily available on the antiquities market in Europe. Foreigners were lured by dragon robes’ beauty and symbolism, evoking the splendour of Chinese imperial court. No wonder that since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century dragon robes had inspired luxurious Western fashion. Wealthy customers admired their exotic look, bold colours, precious materials and intriguing designs. From then on, dragon robes became an inspiration for artists and fashion designers, and still remain one today (Tam 2006: 7).

Researchers into Chinese culture have studied dragon robes since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The study of dragon robes influenced the overall picture of Chinese textiles

---

<sup>1</sup> Helena Heroldová (helena\_heroldova@nm.cz) is the Curator of the Chinese and Lamaistic Collection in the National Museum-Náprstek Museum. This work was financially supported by Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (DKRVO 2015/31, National Museum, 00023272)

for decades (Kuhn 2012:1).<sup>2</sup> Robes decorated with dragons and cosmological symbols became a frequent topic of study, together with rank badges and other textiles that represented status symbols of the ruling class. In the forties and fifties Alan Priest (1898–1969) and Schuyler C. Cammann (1912–1991) described the iconography of dragon robes. Later, researchers John E. Vollmer, and Gary Dickinson together with Linda Wrigglesworth, based their research on detailed historical and social study of the robes. Dragon robes and their symbolism have been at least briefly mentioned in every book dealing with the history of Chinese clothing.

This study provides a new perspective on the dragon robes. It presents them as a professional garment of the members of a professional class of scholar-officials who held offices in the state administration. As the professional dress, the robes expressed the social role and position of scholar-officials in the ruling hierarchy. Taking the meaning of dragon robes as a starting point, the robes are compared to “organisational dress” worn by members of contemporary Western organisations. This point will be discussed in the first part of the study.

In the second part of the study, a detailed description of dragon robes including their symbols and motifs is also provided. The analysis of dragon robes’ design is based on an assumption that small details represented personal elements, while the cut and general design were uniform. The second part is an introduction to the catalogue of selected dragon robes in the Náprstek Museum in Prague. The ten selected examples show specific textile technologies (satin weave, twill weave, gauze weave, embroidery, brocade, goldwork), dates of acquisitions (from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century), and original ownership (travellers’ and collectors’ collections, transfers from regional museums, antiquities shop purchases). The question of later repairs and authenticity of the robes is also mentioned.

## **I. Organisational dress and dragon robes**

### *Fitting in with the organisation: organisational dress*

Dress is an important element in nonverbal communication (Eicher 1999: 1). It is concrete and visible, and due to its visual character it serves as an easily recognisable symbol. On one hand, dress behaviour is based on the political, social and economic context, on the other hand, dress expresses one’s individuality. Dress, including the use of colours, cuts, materials and personal adjustments represent collective, as well as individual values. Dress expresses the relationship of an individual to the collective, including social identification with the collective (Rafaeli et al. 1997: 27).

Individuals perform activities and accept expectations communicated by others. These activities and expectations guide and govern their social behaviour and create social roles. (Rafaeli et al. 1997: 10) Taking on a social role by an individual includes the appropriate dress according to the dress code that represents social expectations bound to the particular social role. In complex societies individuals take several social roles, and may change their dress accordingly.

In the contemporary Western workplace, individuals dress according to their social

---

<sup>2</sup> Besides the dragon robes, influence of Chinese clothing on Western fashion was largely studied. As pointed out by Dieter Kuhn, only recently the research focused on new topic such as archaeological textiles and textiles from earlier periods of Chinese history.

roles within the organisation.<sup>3</sup> Especially if the organisation requires clearly defined social roles and effective professional behaviour, individuals wear uniformed dress.<sup>4</sup> Workers in factories wear dress to protect their bodies, and administrative staff wear dress as symbols of their social role and their position within an organisation (Rafaeli et al. 1997: 10). Organisations create and maintain an organisational culture that defines desired behaviour, including required dress codes. The organisational culture helps the individuals to fit in, and as a result to perform well and to become efficient members of the organisation.

### *Become a scholar-official: dress code during the Qing dynasty*

Dress regulations became an important part of political, social and cultural decisions made by the emperors of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). During the early stages of the development of the state, dress regulations established by the emperors for the members of the ruling clan and the state bureaucracy served to create political and cultural identity. In 1618, Nu'erhachi (1559–1626) united various non-Chinese, Manchu, Tunguz and Mongol peoples living north of the border with Ming China and established a state and a ruling dynasty in contemporary Manchuria. His eighth son and successor, known under the Chinese name (or title) *Hong Taiji* (1592–1643) renamed the ruling dynasty “Qing” in 1636. In 1644 the capital city of Beijing was conquered and the Chinese Ming dynasty was overthrown. Until the invasion of the Chinese territory the Manchu identity had not been clearly defined. However with the gradual conquest of the Chinese territory, the formation of the dynasty and the co-habitation with the ethnic Chinese, Qing emperors began to deliberately shape the Manchu culture. During the following centuries, the Qing ruling class carefully balanced the coexistence of different ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Empire. The Qing emperors build and strengthened Manchu cultural and social identity, including the Manchu language and script, customs and belief, as well as clothing (Cammann 1947: 9-10; Rhoads 2000: 9-10, 52; Vollmer 2000: 14).

References to clothing appeared as early as in imperial edicts in 1636, 1644 and 1652. The importance of the Manchu way of life, including clothing, was emphasised, and a warning against foreign dress was expressed. Clothes represented the identity. According to the edicts, the dynasties who adopted foreign dress lost their power and were soon overthrown. However, detailed recommendations dealing with clothing had not yet been specified in the edicts, although yellow was stipulated as the colour for the emperor, as well as for the dragon design on garments (Cammann 1947: 9; Garrett 1999: 8).

Several variations of the dress code appeared prior to the publishing of the *Huangchao liqi tushi* 皇朝礼器图式 (Illustrated Regulations for the Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Imperial Court). This vast encyclopaedic work was commissioned in 1748, and officially

---

<sup>3</sup> Research into organisational culture, including dress, has a long tradition. For an overview, see Pratt–Rafaeli 1997: 865-6. The dress and required accessories worn by the employee while at work represent the “organisational dress” (Rafaeli–Pratt 1993: 34).

<sup>4</sup> The study of organisational dress by Rafaeli and Pratt distinguishes various types of formal and informal attire and the messages they convey about the social processes within the organisation and within the society in general. They especially focused on the attributes of the dress such as its homogeneity and conspicuousness (visibility). For example, dress worn by university staff has both low visibility and low homogeneity, while army uniforms possess high visibility and high homogeneity (Rafaeli–Pratt 1993: 33-39).

announced in 1759 (Vollmer 2000: 15). The so-called Palace edition was printed in 1766 by the imperial printery *Wuying dian* (Hall of Military Fame) in Beijing. This version contained numerous errors, and the revised version was completed in 1796.<sup>5</sup> The Palace edition was divided by subject, with six headings in eighteen volumes: ritual vessels and objects made of jade, porcelain, bronze and lacquered woods, astrological instruments, clothing, musical instruments, insignia for the members of the imperial household, and military uniforms and weapons (Medley 1982: 2). Clothing was presented in the part called “Hats and Dress” (*Guanfu* 冠服).<sup>6</sup> First the clothes of the Emperor, the Empress, the Princes and the Imperial family were described, then the clothes of scholars-officials and their wives followed. The depiction of the clothes came after the hats and before the surcoats, belts, and dress accessories. The clothes were divided to winter and summer garment according to the season of the year. The crucial division was represented by social function of the dress. The formal dress worn at court and major events called the “audience” (*chaofu* 朝服) came first, followed by the semi-formal dress called “festive” (*jifu* 吉服) including the dragon robes, and the informal “ordinary” (*changfu* 常服) dress came last (Vollmer 2000: 32; Rawski 2001: 41).

According to the *Illustrated Regulations*, the dress of the civil scholar-official of the highest, first grade included a winter formal hat, a summer formal hat, a surcoat with rank badge, surcoat with the rank badge of the Imperial censor, and a formal belt.<sup>7</sup> The dress of the lowest, ninth grade civil scholar-official included a winter formal hat, a summer formal hat, a surcoat with rank badge, a formal belt, a semi-formal winter hat, and a semi-formal summer hat.<sup>8</sup> As for the arrangement of each section, a drawing with the inscription appeared on one page, and a detailed description followed on the next page. For example the drawing of the dragon robe of the civil scholar-official of the seventh grade bore the inscription “Civil seventh grade *mangpao*”, while the description specified the colour of the robe and the design: the colour was blue or deep blue, and the design was five dragons *mang* with four claws.<sup>9</sup>

The copies of *Illustrated Regulations* were distributed among the scholars-officials (Medley 1982: 2-3). Civil and military scholars-officials formed the administrative structure of the Empire. The early Qing emperors adopted the institutions and bureaucratic system from the preceding Ming dynasty. As in the Ming dynasty and the previous dynasties since the Tang in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the scholar-officials for the bureaucratic positions were recruited using the imperial examination system. The successful candidates were appointed to their posts according to their results. During

---

<sup>5</sup> For the history of *Illustrated Regulations*, see the study by Margaret Medley (reprint 1982), published originally in the *Transaction of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, Vol 31, 1957-1959.

<sup>6</sup> The black-and-white manuscript with pictures, with no other publishing data, see online in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, [www http://gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr). For printed copies, see *Huangchao liqi tushi* in *Siku quanshu zhenben liuji*, Volume 122, Issue 29, Shangwu yinshuguan, 1978; *Huangchao liqi tushi* in *Qing dian ban hua hui kan*, Volume 8, Xueyuan chubanshe, 1998; *Huangchao liqi tushi* in *Qin ding si ku quan shu hui yao*, Volume 201, Changchun: Jinlin chuban jituan youxian gongsi, 2005, and *Huangchao liqi tushi*, Yangzhou, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *Huangchao liqi tushi*, *Guanfu* II, Volume 5, pages 20-26. Manuscript held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>8</sup> *Huangchao liqi tushi*, *Guanfu* II, Volume 5, pages 105-110. Manuscript held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>9</sup> *Huangchao liqi tushi*, *Guanfu* II, Volume 5, pages 90-97. Manuscript held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Dragon robe on the page 96.

the Qing dynasty, there were nine ranks of officials, each subdivided into higher and lower categories. The highest appointment was a position in the Imperial court, while the lowest was, for example, a prefectural tax collector. The Manchus formed only a small percentage of the Chinese and various non-Chinese subjects of the Qing dynasty. The majority of the candidates of the imperial examinations were ethnic Chinese, but the dress regulations applied to scholars-officials of all ethnic origins.

## II. Dragon robes: technology and design

### *Pattern, weaving technologies and embellishment*

The dress of scholar-officials during the Qing dynasty represented a cultural and aesthetic mixture of Manchu and Chinese. The narrow, simple and austere clothing of the original inhabitants of Manchuria was embellished with colourful embroidered or woven Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist decorations of Chinese cultural origin (Vollmer 2000: 36).

Dragon robes (longpao 龍袍) represented the semi-formal robes worn by the scholar-officials during the Qing dynasty.<sup>10</sup> The robes were full-length, cut loose in an “A” pattern. The robe had no seam on shoulders (both the front and back was cut in one piece), but the seam ran down in the middle of the front and back part of the body. Male robes had slits on the bottom of the front, back and sides. Female robes had no slits on the front and back. The front of the robe consisted of two overlapping parts secured with fabric loops, and textile or metal buttons.

The sleeves were not attached to the body in the shoulder area, but the upper part of the sleeves was cut in one piece with the body in a “T” pattern. Approximately one half of the long sleeves was made of black or blue, often ribbed fabric, and the sleeves ended with large cuffs<sup>11</sup>. The cuffs originally protected the fingers when riding a horse. According to the *Illustrated Regulations*, the prescribed colour of the fabric was either blue (lan 藍) or deep blue called “stone qing” (shiqing 石青, Mailey 1963: 111).

China has a long and rich tradition in weaving technology. The complex multi-warp and multi-weft weaves with intricate and colourful designs appeared as early as in the second half of the first millennium BC.<sup>12</sup> Various methods of embellishing the fabric including painting, wax or mud-resist dyeing, printing, embroidery, and later goldwork were also used. Throughout the history of textile industry in China, embroidery gradually became the most prominent technology.

Embroidery and goldwork need tough fabric to work on. The fabric must be durable and resilient, because it is covered with large embroidered areas and heavy metallic thread. Twill and satin weaves were common. Each weave produced a different aesthetic effect. Satin weave, in particular, gave a lustrous shine and smooth surface. Besides twill and satin weave, light but resistant gauze weave was used for summer garments. Gauze weave was often embellished with brocading. This is a loom technology, but the visual effect of embroidery was achieved using a supplementary weft. However, the back of the fabric showed the difference. Brocading was usually orderly and regular on the back side, whereas embroidery revealed the embroiderer’s own methods.

---

<sup>10</sup> Wives of the scholars-officials were entitled to wear dragon robes for important occasions.

<sup>11</sup> Some early robes from the seventeenth century had sleeves cut from the same fabric as the body.

<sup>12</sup> Fragments of colourful complex weaves were found in archaeological sites from the period (Kuhn 2012: 83). Other finds of plain weave fragments were dated to the 2700-2500 BC, and a fragment of a silk net-like fabric was dated to 3500 BC (Kuhn 2012: 72).

The finest technology of weaving was “cut-silk”, or “carved-silk” (*kesi* 緯絲) tapestry.<sup>13</sup> The technology originated in a wool tapestry weaving in the Central Asia or the Near East and came to China during the Tang dynasty (618–907). As opposed to loom-woven textiles, the *kesi* was frame-woven, and small bobbins were used (Cammann 1948: 90-91). Unlike repetitive pattern woven on looms, the *kesi* weft does not pass from selvage to selvage, but weft threads of various colours run only on pattern areas, usually in plain weave. Where weft threads of two colours met, they did not overlap or float on the back, but they each turned back, causing a slit between the areas of different colours (Kuhn 2012:524). These slits are characteristic of the *kesi* textiles. Since the Song dynasty (960–1279) written accounts, *kesi* had been praised for its aesthetic appeal, because the technology produced subtle, multicoloured and life-like images of flowers, animals and human figures. The visual effect of *kesi* did not resemble loom-woven textiles and embroideries. Unlike large embroidered pieces, the *kesi* fabric was not heavy and solid, and as opposed to loom-controlled repetitive woven patterns it produced fine and delicate pictures. However, the technology had its setbacks, especially its limited ability to create the shading that was desirable for images of human beings, flowers, etc. *Kesi* was later combined with painting, and painted details and shading were often added.

Dragon robes were embellished with embroidery on plain and twill weaves. Embroidery has a long tradition in China. The earliest embroidered fragments were dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE.<sup>14</sup> Later on, embroidery developed in various styles and techniques. Embroidery manual by Shen Shou (沈壽, 1874–1921), *Embroidery Book by Xuehuan* (*Xuehuan xiupu* 雪宦繡譜) described many different types of stitches according to their visual effect on a fabric.<sup>15</sup> Depending on how the embroiderer worked with a needle and the effect he or she achieved, satin stitches, stitches with a loop and knot stitches can be found on dragon robes.<sup>16</sup> Various types of satin stitch were commonly used. This stitch covered large areas of fabric, and allowed the creation of desirable shading with alternating short and long stitches of various colour threads. Stitches with loops were very popular. This demanding and complicated technique required two needles – one needle embroidered the line of backstitches, while the other needle wrapped the thread around the backstitch line and created miniscule loops. It was frequently used to cover large areas with regular lines of loops resembling chainstitch or tiny knots. The knot stitch was the most laborious and time-consuming stitch, and knot stitch embroideries were highly prized (Hann 2004: 26, Jackson – Hugus 1999: 22-23, Shen 2004: 79-81). Usually only part of the embroidery, such as the central motif, was executed in knot stitch. Besides these stitches, a stitch resembling the Florentine stitch was used on gauze. The Florentine stitch inserted the needle between the threads of the

---

<sup>13</sup> In Heroldová 2013: 19-29 see detailed description of the technology. An extensive study about the origin of *kesi* by Schuyler Cammann is also discussed here.

<sup>14</sup> The history of various stitches pose an appealing insight into the cultural and economic relations between China and foreign countries. For example, satin stitch came to China quite late, during the second half of the first millennium CE, probably with foreign influences around the Silk Route. About the history of stitches, see Bertin-Guest 2003, Young 2003, Jackson – Hugus 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Shen, Shou, *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo* (Illustrated guide on the Embroidery Book by Xuehuan). Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2004. Original text with translation into modern Chinese with explanatory notes.

<sup>16</sup> The oldest stitch, the chain stitch (*lianxianji* 链线迹) discovered in fragments dated to the first millennium BCE (Bertin-Guest 2003: 15, Hann 2004: 26) was not used on dragon robes.

fabric in order to produce geometric shapes. Florentine stitch on gauze resembles brocading, and it is difficult to identify either one or the other technique at the first sight.

At the time of the Qing dynasty, goldwork embroidery became popular on garments as well as on interior textiles. Goldwork embroidery is a technique of Central Asian origin. In China it appeared in the first half of the first millennium CE (Young 2003: 66). Either a piece of thin metallic foil glued to paper or paper painted with golden colour was woven into the fabric, or a fine metal wire was wrapped around a silk or cotton thread and sewn onto fabric with fine silk thread stitches. The metal wire for goldwork was made from various alloys containing gold, silver, copper, brass and tin (Nord – Tronner 2000: 274-279). Depending on the composition of the alloy, the colour of the thread varied from golden and silvery to reddish copper.

### *Design and motifs*

Embroidery on dragon robes not only embellished the garments but featured a variety of symbolic meanings. Mythical animals, flowers, plants and objects, as well as human figures expressed religious and auspicious topics, especially wishes for health, long life and many children. The location of embroidery on particular places on the human body, such as dragons on the heart area and shoulders of dragon robes, enhanced their symbolic protective function.<sup>17</sup> The hem of the garment, especially the edge of sleeves and the hem around the neck played a special role. The embroidered hems were practical because the stitched fabric was durable and resistant, but they also represented a symbolic protection against evil forces that could enter the body by the unprotected areas of bare skin (Paine 2010: 196).

Dragon robes are distinguished by their typical decor of dragons playing with a flaming pearl among the clouds above turbulent waters. The dragon is an ancient symbolic animal with a complex evolution.<sup>18</sup> Dragons appeared on Imperial Court garments at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Since the Song dynasty the dragon became the symbol of the Emperor (Rawski 2001: 42). The early Manchu dragon robes sported either two dragons or two pairs of dragons on the front and back part of the robe accompanied with two dragons on the shoulders. The typical design of eight dragons appeared in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Later, a ninth dragon, hidden on the inner front flap of the robe, was added (Cammann 1947: 13). The ordinary dragon robe had two dragons on the shoulders, and three dragons on the front and back part of the robe. Of these, two dragons appeared above the turbulent waters on the bottom of the robe, and one dragon was located on the chest. The dragons either faced the viewer or they were depicted in profile. Their scaly bodies were twisted, and they showed five or four distinctive claws on their extremities. Five-claw dragons were designed for the closest members of the imperial family and for three highest grades of the scholars-officials, while the four-claw dragons decorated robes of the lower grades (Zhou and Gao 1997: 281, Rawski 2001: 42).

The dragons played with a flaming pearl, a motif which came to China from the Near East during the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD. Although its origin and

---

<sup>17</sup> Similar placement of embroidery was used by various historical and contemporary cultures (Deusen 2001: 25, Paine 2010: 9, 140, 170, 174, 196). Embroidery usually covered vulnerable parts such as head, shoulders, arms, heart, abdomen and genitalia.

<sup>18</sup> For the symbolic associations of the dragon and its employment as an art motif, see Wilson K. 1990.

symbolism are not clear, the flaming pearl with dragons became a common motif on clothing, porcelain and arts and crafts products (Dickinson 2004: 78-81, Mailey 1963: 111). The dragons were surrounded with clouds that covered the whole surface of the dragon robes. The shape of the clouds helps to date the robes. The clouds on early dragon robes resembled ruyi heads with curly tails. Later the clouds in double-eyed forms were linked with wavy stems, and the later development led to groups of dense clouds.<sup>19</sup> However, the examples of the Náprstek Museum dated to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, show various styles of clouds, including thin clouds with tails as well as dense round clouds.

The bottom part of the dragon robe was embellished with a design of deep waters and turbulent waves, with a rock representing the sacred mountain in the middle. The rock represented the universe (Cammann 1947:13), and this motif gave the man who wore the attire the meaning of the centre of the symbolic universe, the ruler over the waters, the Earth and the Heavens. On the early robes, the turbulent wave in the form of elaborate and curvy lines occupied the lower hem of the robe, and later, during the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large area of deep water in the form of diagonal, sometimes wavy stripes was added (Garrett 1999: 34, 52).

Beneath the front dragon, in the middle of the chest, a richly decorated parasol or similar-looking victory banner with flowing ribbons appeared. The parasol or banner were usually embellished with hangings such as musical stones, a pair of fish or a basket with flowers and peaches.

Across the surface of the robe, various decorative as well as religious symbolic elements appeared among the clouds. Decorative elements, common in Chinese visual art, based their symbolic meaning on visual and linguistic puns created on associations (Bartholomew 2012: 16-17). Among the common symbols were bats for happiness, cranes (longevity), coins (wealth), scrolls (learning), twigs of coral (long age and career), rhinoceros horns (virtue), and mushrooms (longevity).<sup>20</sup>

Among the clouds as well as in the turbulent waves, Taoist and Buddhist symbols were depicted. The fan, flute, lotus flower, peach, bamboo, gourd with medicine, basket of flowers and wooden musical instrument represented the Eight Immortals, legendary Taoist deities whose tradition went back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Eight Buddhist symbols represented harmony (a vase), dignity (parasol), rank and nobility (victory banner), happiness (the endless knot), purity (lotus), wealth (a pair of fish), protection (conch) and the wheel of the Buddha's teachings.

The Taoist symbols appeared mainly among the clouds, while the Buddhist elements were depicted in the turbulent waters. In addition to these, the turbulent waves also hosted other visual motifs such as flowers, a giant fish, small pearls jutting among the waves, and pairs of round and rectangular coins.

The selection and combination of symbols and their groupings developed over a long period of time. Certain elements appeared together, but they did not seem to form a fixed system (Wilson V. 1990: 18), and they might be the wearer's personal choice.

Dragon robes were worn with long single-colour surcoats with a square rank badge on the front and back side. The rank badges, with the symbols of nine civil and military

---

<sup>19</sup> The detailed depictions of clouds were provided by Alan Priest 1943: 44.

<sup>20</sup> The mushroom *lingzhi* 靈芝, *Ganoderma lucidum* or *Polyporus lucidus*, was popular traditional medicine. Its typical round head became a common visual motif. It often visually merged with the *ruyi* sceptre. See Bartholomew 2012: 187-190.



grades, were the official insignia of the Imperial bureaucracy.<sup>21</sup> The attire of the scholar-official was completed by a removable collar, high boots, winter and summer hat with a finial made of gold and semi-precious stones, and a belt decorated with silver and gold plaques with semi-precious stones. The colour of the stones on the hat and the belt matched the official rank. Around the neck, a Buddhist rosary with 108 beads of precious stones, rare wood, and ivory was worn.

### III. The Náprstek Museum collection

The collection includes 31 dragon robes.<sup>22</sup> Acquisition history is not known in two examples. Four robes were transferred from regional museums during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is not possible to trace their previous history. Four robes were purchased from the “Klenoty” (“Jewellery”) shops, from the 1950s to the early 1990s a network of shops offering antiquities and luxury imported goods. The appearance and quality of the purchased Chinese textiles show that the shops sold modern replicas as well as genuine antiquities. The majority of robes come from private owners, especially from the period of the 1930s to 1980s. Four dragon robes belonged to acknowledged collections. One robe came from the collection of Václav Stejskal (1851–1934), Maritime Commissioner, who voyaged South-east and East Asia during 1886 and 1888<sup>23</sup>. One robe was owned by Joe Hloucha (1881–1957), collector of Oriental and European art and writer famous for his romances describing relationships between foreigners and Japanese women. One robe (No. 10) belonged to the collection of 207 Chinese and Japanese textiles of Růžena Trnožková (died in 1936, not further data known). One robe (No. 3) came from the estate of Josef Šrogl (1861–1924) who began his professional career as a violinist in the orchestra of the National Theatre in Prague, later toured the United States, Russia, China, and Japan, and eventually settled in Batavia (today Jakarta) in Java, where he became the director of the opera house.

The dragon robes in the collection are made either of embroidered, brocaded or goldworked satin (twelve examples), or embroidered or brocaded gauze (eleven examples). Only four robes are based on twill weave. Satin weave was probably easier to work on than twill, or the lustrous satin provided better visual effect. Four examples represent the kesi tapestry.

The dragon robes are mostly unified in their design. Although there is variability in waves and deep water design, several dragon robes show similar design consisting of combinations of Taoist motifs, cranes, bats, and *ji* (luck) characters across the surface. Often, the motifs of three halberds in a vase and a pavilion hidden among the waves appeared. Both motifs are rebuses: three halberds stand for the “three official promotions”, and the pavilion for the highest imperial examinations (Welch 2008: 253, 257).

---

<sup>21</sup> For the collection of 44 rank badges in the Náprstek Museum, see Heroldová 2011a: 87-138.

<sup>22</sup> There is also one uncut gauze robe length, and one gauze robe remade into the ladie’s evening gown, according to the style during the 1920s. Especially the remade robe represents a valuable example of reuse of Chinese textile in western society. However, this example does not fall within the scope of this study.

<sup>23</sup> The robe from the Václav Stejskal’s collection was published several times, see Heroldová 2010, 2011b, 2014c. The history of the robe is well documented. Václav Stejskal described his purchase in his travel diary, and the photopicture of Stejska’s wife wearing the robe in the garden of their villa photographed during the late years of Václav Stejskal is among the archival material. There are also letters from the 1926 and 1927 dealing with the restoration of the robe.

The dragon robes show various signs of damage. Unfortunately, there is almost no connection between the acquisition history of the robe and its damage. Moreover, the very good condition of the robes purchased in the Klenoty shops opens the possibility of modern replicas. However, most robes were worn out, and the damage is found around the neck, in the shoulder area and at the bottom opening of the sleeves. The fabric was torn, and the goldwork was loosened. The lining is often spotted. Substantial damage also appeared. Several robes were probably washed or damaged by water, and as the result their colours are dissolved. Later repairs are documented only in one example. Václav Stejskal's correspondence contained letters from 1926 and 1927 between Václav Stejskal and the authorities of the National Museum concerning the repairs of seams and lining (Heroldová 2009: 253, Heroldová 2011b: 60-61).

The dating of the robes is not an easy problem to solve. The dragon robes in general are dated by the development of styles, design and motifs. Alan Priest devoted his study to the development of the deep water design and cloud design that changed during various periods of the Qing dynasty (Priest 1943). Early robes had only a narrow pattern of turbulent waves on the bottom of the robe<sup>24</sup>, whereas deep water lines over a large part of the robe appeared during the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Garrett 1999: 34, 52).

Only one robe of the Náprstek Museum can be dated with certainty by its purchase date. The robe Václav Stejskal bought on December 24, 1887, in Canton (Guangzhou) was without doubt produced only several years before. A few robes were dated approximately by their original owners (for example the robe No. 4 was purchased in China in the 1930s). Other robes can be vaguely dated to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A robe similar to the robes with the most common design in the Náprstek Museum with *ji* characters, bats, cranes, and three halberds in vases (No. 1, 8) was dated to the 1880s by Haig and Shelton (Haig – Shelton 2006: 20-21).

#### **IV. Conclusion: Dragon robes both uniformed and individualised**

The collection of thirty one dragon robes in the Náprstek Museum represents a sufficient set for the study of technologies and designs of the robes, as well as for their social context. The robes show various weaving and embroidery technologies, however some of them are more common than others. Embroidery and brocading on satin and discontinuous weave on gauze are the most common technologies, while time-consuming and financially expensive kesi garment is represented only by a few examples. As for the design, although there are various types of the basic design of dragons among clouds above the turbulent waves and deep waters, the collection has several examples of robes with an identical composition of Taoist symbols, cranes, bats, lucky characters and halberds in waves. The composition and the motifs are almost identical to tiny details on several robes, namely on robes with woven design. This probably represents the common design of dragon robes during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

---

<sup>24</sup> The burial robes of Prince Aisin-Gioro Yunli (1697–1738), the seventeenth son of the Kangxi Emperor, noted artist, calligrapher and collector, a holder of important government posts who escorted the Dalai Lama from Beijing to Tibet after his visit in 1734, appeared on the antiquities market in Beijing during the 1930s. The design of turbulent billowing water on his robes formed one fifth of the robe. (Mailey 1963: 104)

Probably because of the technological possibilities, embroidered robes show more variety in design and motifs than the woven ones.

Dragon robes were worn by the scholar-officials while at work or at important official and family gatherings and festivals. The assembly of men wearing the deep blue dragon robes with shimmering golden and silver dragons, and with colourful hats with semi-precious stones must have been a stunning sight. Viewed from afar, the crowd of people all looking the same certainly created the impression of power and strength. On the other hand, the close view revealed the personal dimension of the dragon robes. The individual motifs represented the mental universe of the scholar-official, his religious beliefs, as well as individual aesthetic tastes. However, the recurrent presence of the most common design with bats, cranes and lucky characters in the Náprstek Museum collection indicates the far more unified character of dragon robes, including the manufacture of identical products.

Nevertheless, dragon robes express great homogeneity and visibility, as well as allowing a personal voice that reveals the complexity of social identity encompassing both social and personal values. Dragon robes convey multiple layers of meaning, especially the multifaceted relationships between the collective and the individual. The dragon robe as a garment deliberately created in order to embody the Manchu Qing social hierarchy encapsulate the complex interactions between the Empire and its subjects.

## Catalogue

**Satin background, brocaded**

No. 1

Inv. No. 29059



Dragon robe, men's

Private owner

Length 128 cm

Satin, blue colour

Brocade, metallic thread silver colour

Nine five-claw dragons

Parasol/banner in the middle with flying ribbons

Taoist symbols, cranes, ji characters

Two-storied pavilions in the waves, small dragons, drops of water

Lining

Good condition

Not published

Reference: Identical design and motifs, see Haig – Shelton 2006: 20-21. This is the most common design of dragon robe found in the Náprstek Museum Collection. See also no. 8 in the Catalogue. Haig – Shelton date a similar robe to the 1880s.

No. 2  
Inv. No. A5565



Dragon robe, woman's  
Private owner, 1951  
Length 140 cm  
Satin, blue colour  
Brocaded, metallic thread golden colour  
Nine four-claw dragons  
Taoist and Buddhist symbols, bats, gourds with swastikas, flowers and flower baskets  
Large peony flowers in the waves, two fish and lions holding coins  
No lining  
Used  
Damaged  
Not published

**Satin background, embroidered**

No. 3

Inv. No. 22651



Dragon robe, men's (?)

Šrogl, 1904

Length 132 cm

Satin, brown colour

Thin body and sleeves

Embroidery, plain stitch, knots, goldwork

Eight four-claw dragons

Parasol/banner in the middle

Taoist symbols, flowers, bats

Two fish in waves, large pink peonies, gourds, Buddhist symbols, deep waves rising to the centre with a mountain

Lining, purple colour

Used

Not published

**Satin background, goldwork**

No. 4

Inv. No. 29197



Dragon robe, woman's

Private owner, 1981. Purchased in China in the 1930s by the then ambassador to China.

Length 139 cm

Satin, blue colour

Metallic goldwork

Nine five-claw dragons

Victory banner/vase with ruyi-like hangings

Taoist symbols, cranes, ji characters

Two fish and pavilions in waves

Lining

Used

Damaged

Not published

Reference: Clouds date the robe to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Twill background, embroidered**

No. 5

Inv. No. A4795



Dragon robe, men's

Acquisition 1951

Length 130 cm

Twill, brown colour

Embroidery, plain stitch, knots, goldwork

Nine five-claw dragons

Basket with flowers and peaches

Taoist symbols, cranes, bats

Two small dragons in waves, artemisia leaves, ruyi sceptres, little pavilions

Lining

Used

Good condition

Published: Heroldová 2015

Reference: Brown colour was considered as a shade of yellow, and hence it was used by the member of the emperor's family (Dickinson – Wrigglesworth 2000: 161, pict.p. 161). Dragon robe in brown colour, see the Pilsen collection (Heroldová – Mleziva: 21, pict. 20).



**Twill background, brocaded**

No. 6

Inv. No. A5591



Dragon robe, men's

Acquisition 1946

Length 139 cm

Twill, dark blue colour

Golden colour brocading

Nine five-claw dragons

Unidentified object with ribbons (damaged in the central seam)

Buddhist symbols, bats, ji characters

Rock with the mushroom of immortality, stems of coral, ruyi, three jewels, coins in the waves

Lining, one inner breast pocket

Used

Very damaged

Not published

**Twill background, goldwork**

No. 7

Inv. No. A5553



Dragon robe, men's

Klenoty, 1968

Length 142 cm

Twill, dark blue colour

Goldwork

Nine five-claw dragons

Banner/vase with ruyi-like hangings in the middle of the chest

Taoist symbols, cranes, gourds, bats with swastikas, ji characters

Two small dragons in the waves

Lining

Replica (?), with a price tag 39.00 yuan

Used

Damaged

Not published

**Gauze background, brocaded/embroidered, goldwork**

No. 8

Inv. No. A5593



Dragon robe, men's

Acquisition 1946

Length 130 cm

Gauze, dark violet colour

Non-continuous thread brocading or embroidery

Nine five-claw dragons

Parasol in the middle

Taoist symbols, cranes, bats, ji characters

Three halberds in a vase above waves

Lining

Used

Damaged (washed, dissolved colour)

Not published

Reference: Identical design and motifs, see Haig – Shelton 2006: 20-21. This is the most common design of dragon robe found in the Náprstek Museum Collection. See also No. 1 of the Catalogue. Haig – Shelton date a similar robe to the 1880s.

No. 9  
Inv. No. A17187



Dragon robe, men's  
Transferred from a regional museum, 1987  
Length 142 cm  
Gauze, blue colour  
Non-continuous brocading/embroidery  
Nine five-claw dragons  
Parasol in the middle  
Taoist symbols, ji character  
Vases with three halberds in waves  
No lining  
Very good condition (a modern replica?)  
Not published

**Kesi background**

No. 10

Inv. No. A5577



Dragon robe, men's

Trnožková, 1937

Length 144 cm

Kesi, orange (apricot) colour

Nine five-claw dragons

No symbol in the middle of the chest

Cranes, bats bearing halberds, coins, swastikas and other auspicious symbols

Two fish above waves

Lining

Used

Good condition

Not published



Plate 1

Inv. No. 46653/6

Watercolour painting on pith paper, 20.4 × 32 cm, late 19<sup>th</sup> century

A son pays homage to his parents among the members of the family. The women wear ladies' dragon robes and skirts, the men wear dragon robes and blue outer coats with rank badges. Dragon robes both for women and men show the social function of the garment, suitable for highly important occasions. The watercolour painting belongs to a series depicting scenes from the life of a scholar-official.

### Literature:

BARTHOLOMEW Tse, Terese. *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art*. Asian Art Museum, 2012.

BERTIN-GUEST, Josiane. *Chinese Embroidery. Traditional Techniques*. Krause publications, 2003.

CAMMANN, Schuyler. Notes on the Origin of Chinese K'o-ssü Tapestry. *Artibus Asiae*, 11/1, 2 (1948): 90-110.

CAMMANN, Schuyler. A Robe of the Ch'ien-Lung Emperor. *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 10 (1947): 8-19.

DEUSEN, Kira van. *The Flying Tiger. Women Shamans and Storytellers of the Amur*. Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

DICKINSON, Gary. The "Tail-Eater". A Possible Origin of the Dragon and Pearl. *HALI* 25th anniversary 2004:78-81.

DICKINSON, Gary – Linda Wrigglesworth. *Imperial Wardrobe*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2000.

- EICHER, Joanne B., ed. *Dress and Ethnicity. Change Across Space and Time*. Berg: 1999.
- GARRETT, Valery M. *Chinese Dragon Robes*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
- HAIG, Paul – Marla Shelton. *Threads of Gold. Chinese Textiles. Ming to Ch'ing*. Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2006.
- HANN, M.A. *Dragons, Unicorns and Phoenixes – Origin and Continuity of Technique and Motif*. University Gallery Leeds, 2004.
- HEROLDOVÁ, Helena. *Sober Luxury: Three Examples of Late Kesi Silk Tapestries in the Náprstek Museum*. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 34/2 (2013): 19-29.
- HEROLDOVÁ, Helena (a). *Rank Badges from the Chinese Collection of the Náprstek Museum*. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 32 (2011): 87-138.
- HEROLDOVÁ, Helena (b). *The Exotic Salon of the Master of the House: The History of the Václav Stejskal Collection*. Praha: Národní muzeum, 2011.
- HEROLDOVÁ, Helena. *Reputation and Oblivion: The History of Václav Stejskal's Eastern Asia Collection*. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 31 (2010): 23-36.
- HEROLDOVÁ, Helena. "Šťastné roucho" Václava Stejskala. Slobodník, Martin, ed. *Našinec v Oriente. Cestovatelia zo Slovenska a Čiech v Ázii a Afrike* (19. stor. – I. pol. 20. stor.). Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, 2009, 253 – 262.
- HEROLDOVÁ, Helena – Jindřich Mleziva. *Čínský textil ve sbírce Západočeského muzea v Plzni*. Plzeň: Západočeské muzeum, 2011.
- Huangchao liqi tushi. <http://gallica.bnf.fr>
- JACKSON, Beverly – David Hugus: *Ladder to the Clouds. Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1999.
- KUHN, Dieter, ed. *Chinese Silks*. Yale University Press, 2012.
- MAILEY, Jean E. *Ancestors and Tomb Robes*. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 22/3 (1963): 101-115.
- MEDLEY, Margaret. *The "Illustrated Regulations for Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Ch'ing Dynasty"*. London: Han-shan Tang, 1982.
- NORD, Anders G. – Kate Tronner. *A Note on the Analysis of Gilded Metal Embroidery Threads*. *Studies in Conservation*, 45/4 (2000): 274-279.
- PAINE, Sheila. *Embroidered Textiles: A World Guide to Traditional Patterns*. Thames & Hudson, 2010.
- PRATT, Michael G. – Anat Rafaeli. *Organizational Dress as a Symbol of Multilayered Social Identities*. *The Academy of Management Journal* 40/4 (1997): 862-898.
- PRIEST, Alan. *Prepare for Emperors*. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2/1 (1943): 33-46.
- RAFAELI, Anat – Jane Dutton, Celia V. Harquail, Stephanie Mackie-Lewis. "Navigating by Attire: The Use of Dress by Female Administrative Employees." *The Academy of Management Journal* 40/1 (1997): 9-45.
- RAFAELI, Anat – Michael G. Pratt. "Tailored Meanings: On the Meaning and Impact of Organizational Dress." *The Academy of Management Journal* 18/1 (1993): 32-55.
- RAWSKI, Evelyn. *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*. University of California Press, 2001.

- RHOADS, Edward. *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928*. University of Washington Press, 2000.
- SHEN, Shou. *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo (Illustrated guide on the Embroidery Book by Xuehuan)*. Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2004.
- TAM, Vivienne. *China Chic*. Harper Design, 2006.
- VOLLMER, John E. "Clothed to Rule the Universe: Ming and Qing Dynasty Textiles at The Art Institute of Chicago." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, 26/2 (2000): 12-51+99-105.
- WELCH Bjaaland, Patricia. *Chinese Art. A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*. Tuttle Publishing: 2008.
- WILSON, Keith, J. "Powerful Form and Potent Symbol: The Dragon in Asia." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 77/8 (1990): 286-323.
- WILSON, Verity. *Chinese Dress*. (1986) Victoria and Albert Museum, 1990.
- YOUNG, Yang Chung. *Painting with a Needle. Learning the Art of Silk Embroidery*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003.
- ZHOU Xun – Gao Chunming. *Zhongguo lishi fushi*. Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1997.